

Message Text

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 3 PRAGUE 1520

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINT, CZ
SUBJECT: THE CZECHOSLOVAK LEADERSHIP-STABILITY THROUGH COLLEGIALITY

SUMMARY: STRAINS ON THE CZECHOSLOVAK LEADERSHIP SINCE HELSINKI
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APPEAR TO HAVE REINFORCED ITS COLLEGIAL INSTINCTS TO COMPROMISE
INTERNAL DIFFERENCES IN ORDER TO SURVIVE. THE SPRING 1977
CAMPAIGN OF CHARTER 77 ACTIVISTS SEEKING GREATER RESPECT FOR HUMAN
RIGHTS APPEARS TO US TO HAVE GENERATED REMARKABLE EXTERNAL
INTEREST BUT PRECIOUS LITTLE INTERNAL CHANGE, WHILE LEAVING HUSAK,
ON THE EVE OF BELGRADE 77 PREP TALKS, WELL ENTRENCHED AS FIRST
AMONG EQUALS. PODGORNÝ'S OUSTER FROM THE SOVIET PRESIDÍUM WILL

BE WATCHED CLOSELY IN PRAGUE, HOWEVER, AS A HARBINGER OF LEADERSHIP CHANGES NOT ONLY IN MOSCOW BUT ALSO HERE. END SUMMARY.

1. THIS EMBASSY IS ON RECORD AS THINKING THAT THE MOST IMPORTANT FACTOR IN THE CONTINUATION IN POWER OF THE CURRENT CZECHOSLOVAK REGIME IS THE ATTITUDE OF THE SOVIET LEADERSHIP. WITH THE PODGORNÝ OUSTER SUGGESTING THAT MOVEMENT IN THE BREZHNEV SUCCESSION DRAMA HAS BEGUN, IT MAY BE USEFUL TO REVIEW THE CURRENT STATUS OF THE PRAGUE LEADERSHIP.

2. THE STABILITY AND COHESIVENESS OF THE LEADERSHIP HAVE BEEN TESTED DURING THE PAST YEAR AND A HALF BY WESTERN PRESSURES TO CONFORM WITH PROVISIONS OF THE HELSINKI FINAL ACT CLASHING WITH CONTINUING EFFORTS BY THE HUSAK REGIME TO GAIN INTERNATIONAL RESPECTABILITY, AN INCREASINGLY STAGNATING ECONOMY (INCLUDING A NEED TO EXPAND HARD CURRENCY EARNINGS AND MEET AGRICULTURAL SHORTFALLS), AND, MOST RECENTLY, THE SMALL BUT HIGHLY VISIBLE CHARTER 77 HUMAN RIGHTS MOVEMENT. THE FIRST TWO CHALLENGES APPEAR TO HAVE FOUND THE PRTY LEADERSHIP COMPLETELY UNITED IN UNWILLINGNESS SIGNIFICANTLY TO LOOSEN LONGSTANDING RESTRICTIONS ON FOREIGN TRAVEL, ACCESS TO INFORMATION AND FREE EXPRESSION OR TO RE-EXPLORE THE TREACHEROUS TERRAIN OF ECONOMIC REFORM. THE CHARTER 77 ISSUE MAY, HOWEVER, HAVE BEEN THE FIRST MAJOR CHALLENGE TO THE UNIT OF THE LEADERSHIP SINCE HUSAK CONSOLIDATED HIS POSITION AS NO. 1 IN 1975 BY ASSUMING THE PRESIDENCY OF THE REPUBLIC, WHILE RETAINING HIS POST AS PARTY CHIEF. THE CHARTER ISSUE APPEARED TO BE ONE THAT WOULD ACTIVATE LATENT TENSIONS BETWEEN "MODERATES" AND "HARDLINERS" (OR, MORE ACCURATELY IN OUR VIEW, BETWEEN "HARD-LINERS" AND "HARDER-LINERS") OVER THE PROPER METHOD OF HANDLING
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DISSIDENCE.

3. SOME WESTERN OBSERVERS HAVE PROFESSED TO FIND EVIDENCE OF A CLASH WITHIN THE LEADERSHIP IN THE DIFFERENCE IN TONE BETWEEN THE FEW DIRECT REFERENCES REPORTED IN THE MEDIA TO CHARTER 77 BY HUSAK, BILAK, INDRA AND KAPEK--WITH HUSAK APPEARING Milder THAN THE OTHER THREE, ALL OF WHOM ARE REPUTED "HARDER--LINERS." OUR READING, HOWEVER, IS THAT IF GENUINE DIFFERENCES IN FACT EXISTED, THE DESIRE TO PROJECT COLLEGIAL UNITY NEVERTHELESS HAS TRIUMPHED, AT LEAST TO DATE. PERHAPS THE MOST INTERESTING ASPECT OF PUBLIC TREATMENT OF THE CHARTERISSUE BY THE LEADERSHIP WAS THE RELATIVELY SMALL NUMBER OF DIRECT REFERENCES TO IT BY PRESIDUM OR SECRETARIAT MEMBERS AND THE FAILURE OF SOME OF THEM TO BE QUOTED IN THE MEDIA DENOUNCING IT.

4. MEDIA TREATMENT OF CHARTER 77 HAS VARIED SO WIDELY, SOMETIMES IN THE SAME ISSUE OF THE SAME PAPER, BETWEEN RELATIVELY CALM AND REASONED REJECTION AND NASTY ACCUSATIONS AND INSINUATIONS THAT STUDY OF IT OFFERS NO PERSUASIVE CLUE TO CONFLICTING ATTITUDES

OF INDIVIDUAL LEADERS. OVER THE LACTIVE LIFE OF THE CHARTER ISSUE IT
WOULD BE SAFE TO SAY THAT HARDER-LINE RHETORIC HAS PREVAILED TO
DATE. ON THE OTHER HAND, EXCLUDING DETENTIONS FOR QUESTIONING,
THERE HAVE SO FAR BEEN NO ARRESTS DIRECTLY LINKED TO CHARTER
ACTIVITY (HAVEL AND LEDERER'S ARRESTS NOW APPEAR TO HAVE BEEN
CONNECTED WITH AN EFFORT TO SMUGGLE MEMOIRS
OF FORMER INTERIOR MINISTER PROKOP DRTINA TO THE WEST), WHICH
PRESUMABLY REFLECTS HUSAK'S CELEBRATED AVERSION TO IMPRISONING
POLITICAL DISSIDENTS.

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5. WITH THE CHARTER ISSUE IN THE DEEP FREEZE FOR THE TIME

BEING, THERE IS NO SURFACE INDICATION THAT THERE HAS BEEN ANY
CHANGE IN LEADERSHIP RELATIONS. HUSAK MAY HAVE LOST SOME FAVOR
IN MOSCOW OVER EXTERNAL DIFFICULTIES CAUSED BY CHARTER 77 IN
STIRRING UP OTHER DISSIDENT ELEMENTS IN EASTERN EUROPE, GIVING
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THE EUROCOMMUNISTS ANOTHER CAUSE TO BE USED AGAINST SOVIET
IDEOLOGISTS, AND COMPLICATING MOSCOW'S PREPARATIONS FOR BELGRADE 77.
BUT HE HAS NOTABLY SUCCEEDED INTERNALLY IN NEUTRALIZING ANY REAL
THREAT FROM THE LARGE NUMBER OF FORMER DUBCEK SUPPORTERS WHO
MIGHT HAVE SYMPATHIZED WITH THE CHRTER ADHERENTS. HE DEFINITELY
REMAINS NUMBER ONE, ACTING "PRESIDENTIAL" AND EXUDING DIGNITY AND
ASSURANCE IN PUBLIC APPERANCES. MOREOVER, HUSAK'S CLOSE TIES
WITH BREZHNEV MAY RESULT IN SOME STRENGTHENING OF HIS STANDING,
IF BREZHNEV EMERGES FROM THE PODGORNÝ AFFAIR WITH AN EVEN
GREATER PARTY-STATE LEADERSHIP ROLE. BILAK CONTINUES TO
OCCUPY THE UNDISPUTED NUMBER TWO PARTY POSITION IN PROTOCOL STANDING
AND AUTHORITY, AND HE APPEARS TO RETAIN FIRM CONTROL OVER TIES
WITH OTHER COMMUNIST PARTIES, BUT IN PUBLIC APPEARANCES EVIDENCES
NO CHARISMATIC QUALITIES AND IS BUT A PALE SHADOW TO HUSAK.
THESE TWO FIGURES RECEIVE BY FAR THE LARGEST AMOUNT OF MEDIA
ATTENTION OF ALL PARTY LEADERS, IF FOR NO OTHER REASON THAN THE
CONSTANT FLOW OF FOREIGN VISITORS WHO MUST BE GREETED OR
RECEIVED. TYPICALLY, RUDE PRAVO FRONTPAGE JUNE 3 A PHOTO OF
BILAK GREETING HUSAK ON HIS RETURN FROM IRAQ.

6. PUBLIC APPEARANCES OF THE LEADERS SEEM TO BE APPROXIMATELY
BALANCED, EITHER AS A MATTER OF POLICY OR AS A RESULT OF POTENTIAL
COMPETITORS KEEPING A CLOSE EYE ON EACH OTHER, SO AS TO GIVE NONE
OF THEM ANY EXCESSIVE EXPOSURE. EVEN HUSAK AT TIMES GOES FOR
SEVERAL WEEKS WITHOUT MAKING A RECORDED PUBLIC APPEARANCE. ON
THE OTHER HAND, HUSAK SEEMS TO BE DEVELOPING A PRACTICE OF DOING
SOME OFFICIAL FOREIGN TRAVEL ALONE; IN THE PAST SIX MONTHS HE
HAS GONE TWICE TO MOSCOW AND ONCE TO POLAND ACCOMPANIED ONLY
BY HIS PERSONAL STAFF, AND THIS WEEK HE IS VISITING IRAQ.
THIS SERVES TO SET HIM FURTHER APART FROM AND ABOVE THE REST OF
THE COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP. OF THE OTHER MEMBERS OF THE PARTY
PRESIDIUM ASIDE FROM HUSAK AND BILAK, STROUGAL IS THE ONE MOST
FREQUENTLY IN THE PUBLIC EYE. HE TRIES HARD TO PROJECT "PRESENCE"
BUT HAS THE MISFORTUNE OF NOT APPEARING TOO BRIGHT ON TV.
STRANGELY ENOUGH, ALOIS INDRA, WHOSE AMBITION FOR HIGHER POSITION
IS NOT THOUGHT TO HAVE DIMINISHED, IS SELDOM ABLE TO USE HIS POSITION
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AS FEDERAL ASSEMBLY HOLDS FEW PLENARY SESSIONS AND THE DIVISION
OF RESPONSIBILITIES IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA ARE SUCH THAT THE ONLY FOREIGN

DIGNITARIES INDRA NORMALLY RECEIVES ARE FOREIGN LEGISLATORS. OCCASIONALLY, HOWEVER, AS AT THE SOCIALIST PARTY CONGRESS IN JANUARY AND CEREMONIES CELEBRATING THE 1948 CP SEIZURE OF POWER IN FEBRUARY, INDRA STILL MANAGES TO GAIN A MAJOR PLATFORM TO SPEAK OUT. THE NAME OF PRAGUE PARTY FIRST SECRETARY ANTONIN KAPEK SURFACED FAIRLY FREQUENTLY IN THE RUMOR MILL DURING THE LAST FEW MONTHS AS THE HARDER-OINER LIKELY TO REPLACE HUSAK, SHOULD CHARTER 77 GET OUT OF HAND. KAPEK SEEMS TO HAVE SOMEWHAT MORE POLITICAL SEX APPEAL THAN SOME OF THE FACELESS MEMBERS OF THE LEADERSHIP. HIS CREDENTIALS, HOWEVER, SEEM NO BETTER THAN THOSE OF THE OTHER HARDER-LINERS, BILAK AND INDRA, WHOSE OWN AMBAITIONS WOULD PRESUMABLY DETER THEM FROM GIVING HIM A LEG UP. WE TEND TO BELIEVE THAT RUMORS OF KAPEK'S LIKELY ADVANCEMENT ARE SPREAD EITHER BY PARTY LOYALISTS ATTEMPTING TO ALARM WESTERNERS TO LAY OFF ATTACKING HUSAK FOR FEAR THAT HIS REGIME MIGHT BE SUCCEEDED BY AN EVEN MORE REPRESSIVE ONE UNDER KAPEK OR BY CZECHS UNHAPPY THAT A SLOVAK CONTINUES TO HOLD THE TOP PARTY AND STATE POSTS.

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7. IN ANY CASE, WE HAVE SEEN NO CONVINCING SIGNS THAT THE SOVIETS ARE ACTIVELY INTERESTED IN A CHANGE IN LEADERSHIP. ON THE PARTY SIDE, HUSAK AND BILAK SEEM TO HAVE ALMOST A MONOPOLY ON CONTACTS WITH HIGH LEVEL SOVIET VISITORS, AT LEAST AS REPORTED IN THE MEDIA. THERE IS NO VISIBLE EVIDENCE OF THE SOVIETS SHOWING SPECIAL
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FAVOR TO ANY OTHER PARTY LEADER.

8. THE ONLY SENIOR OFFICIAL WHO IN ANY WAY APPROACHES HUSAK IN PRESENCE AND IN MEDIA ATTENTION IS NOT A PRESIDIUM MEMBER. FOREIGN MINISTER BOHUSLAV CHNOUPEK'S ACTIVIST FOREIGN POLICY KEEPS HIM ALMOST CONSTANTLY IN PUBLIC VIEW AND IN A FIELD THAT IS USUALLY NONCONTROVERSIAL AS FAR AS THE AVERAGE CITIZEN IS CONCERNED. EVEN WHEN NOT ON CAMERA CHNOUPEK IS A DISTINCTIVE FIGURE AND SEEMS TO SEEK DELIBERATELY TO DRAMATIZE HIMSELF. HIS PERSONAL LINKS WITH THE SOVIETS APPEAR STRONG; HE IS KNOWN TO HAVE ESPECIALLY CLOSE TIES TO GROMYKO. ONE OF HIS UNDERLINGS RECENTLY SAID THAT CHNOUPEK IS "A BILAK MAN." WE TEND TO BELIEVE THAT HE IS NOT STRONGLY COMMITTED TO ANY CAMP IN THE LEADERSHIP, BUT IS KEEPING HIS PARTY TIES STRONG AND STAYING LOOSE TO BE ABLE TO MOVE IN ANY DIRECTION IF AN OPENING TOWARD THE TOP APPEARS.

9. AT THIS POINT, THE PARTY LEADERSHIP STRIKES US AS SUFFICIENTLY COHESIVE AND STABLE TO DEAL WITH ANY FORESEEABLE DOMESTIC ISSUES WITHOUT MAJOR INTERNAL STRESS AND PROBABLY TO ADJUST RELATIVELY SMOOTHLY TO ORDERLY CHANGES IN THE SOVIET LEADERSHIP. PRESSURES TO REORGANIZE CZECHOSLOVAKIA ALONG WHATEVER LINES EMERGE FROM THE "BREZHNEV" CONSTITUTION COULD DISTURB THE CURRENT BALANCE OF THE LEADERSHIP, BUT CZECHOSLOVAK REGIMES HAVE SHOWN THEMSELVES ABLE TO RESIST SUCH PRESSURES FOR EXTENDED PERIODS, E.G., NOVOTNY'S PROTRACTED FENDING OFF OF DESTALINIZATION. THE UNLIKELY EVENT OF A BREZHNEV SUCCESSOR REGIME SWERVING DRASTICALLY TOWARD EITHER MORE LIBERAL OR MORE REPRESSIVE POLICIES WOULD, OF COURSE, MAKE THE FUTURE STABILITY OF THE CZECHOSLOVAK LEADERSHIP MOOT.

10. SECOND-LEVEL LEADERSHIP AT THE GOVERNMENT TECHNOCRAT LEVEL IS NOT, HOWEVER, AS SECURE IN ITS TENURE AS THE PARTY PRESIDIUM SEEMS TO BE. LAST FALL SAW THE OUSTER OF THE FEDERAL AGRICULTURE MINISTER, A VICTIM OF DROUGHT-CAUSED CROP FAILURES, AND TWO VICE PREMIERS WITH RESPONSIBILITIES IN ECONOMIC AREAS. RUMORS

ARE NOW CIRCULATING THAT FOREIGN TRADE MINISTER BARCAK MAY BE
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"KICKED UPSTAIRS" TO VICE-PREMIER. RECENT, UNUSUALLY DIRECT
CRITICISM BY HUSAK (AT THE 9TH TRADE UNIONS CONGRESS) OF SHORTCOMINGS
OF SOME BRANCHES OF THE ECONOMY MAY PRESAGE OTHER MINISTERIAL CHANGES

,
BUT THEY ARE LIKELY TO HAVE NO GREATER SIGNIFICANCE THAN A LOSING
BALL TEAM CHANGING MANAGERS. IT IS FAIR TO ASK, HOWEVER,
HOW SERIOUS ECONOMIC PROBLEMS MUST BECOME BEFORE PARTY OFFICIALS
HAVE TO SHARE THE BLAME. WE HAVE NO ANSWER TO THAT, BUT SUSPECT
THAT IF THE AXE EVENTUALLY FALLS ON PARTY OFFICIALS IT WILL BE
BELOW THE SECRETARIAT LEVEL AND HAVE RELATIVELY MINOR VIBRATIONS
AT THAT LEVEL AND ABOVE.

11. CONCLUSION: WHATEVER ONE'S PERSONAL OPINION OF THE CZECHOSLOVAK
LEADERSHIP-AND WE DON'T BELIEVE ANY MEMBER IS THE SORT ONE
WOULD WANT HIS DAUGHTER TO MARRY-ITS COMPOSITION, LIKE THAT OF
THE POST-KHRUSCHEV COLLEGIAL SOVIET LEADERSHIP, DOES SEEM WELL
DESIGNED FOR SURVIVAL. WHILE THERE ARE CERTAIN TO BE DIFFERENCES
OF VIEW, THESE MAY BE MORE OF DEGREE THAN OF BASIC APPROACH.
ALMOST CERTAINLY THERE IS FULL AGREEMENT THAT IN DEALING
WITH THE SOVIETS SAFETY IS PREFERABLE TO BEING SORRY- THAT IT
IS BETTER TO GO TOO FAR IN ANTICIPATING SOVIET DESIRES THAN NOT
FAR ENOUGH. WITH THAT BASIC AGREEMENT, THE LEADERSHIP PROBABLY
DOES NOT FIND IT HARD TO WORK OUR COMPROMISES ON MOST QUESTIONS.
WHERE COMPROMISES ARE NOT EASILY FOUND, DIFFERENCES IN
NATIONALITY, PROCHIAL INTERESTS, AND CONFLICTING AMBITIONS MAY
KEEP PERMANENT, DIVISIVE GROUPINGS FROM FORMING; TO WHAT EXTENT,
FOR EXAMPLE, CAN CZECH HARDER-LINER KAPEK MAKE COMMON CAUSE
WITH SLOVAK HARDER-LINER LENART? ANOTHER UNITING FACTOR IN THE
LEADERSHIP IS PROBABLY A PERVERSIVE FEAR OF INNOVATION, AND
PREFERENCE TO STICK TO KNOWN PATHS. IN THE MEDIUM TERM, LACK
OF INNOVATION IS A FORCE FOR STABILITY; IN THE LONGER TERM,
AS NOVOTNY EVENTUALLY FOUND, IT MUST LEAD TO PRESSURES
FROM WITHIN, AS WELL AS FROM OUTSIDE THE PARTY FOR
DRASTIC CHANGE.
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